Imagining the Absolute: The "Veil of Maya" as a Semiotic Device[1]

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Abstract

Through dialogue with three philosophers and theologians, Luigi Pareyson, Emmanuel Levinas, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, the paper seeks to answer four questions: 1) Is spiritual life art? 2) Is art communication with transcendence? 3) Is communication with transcendence revelation of the absolute? 4) Is revelation of the absolute communion with pain? The paper claims that 1) spiritual life is, in a certain sense, art because it bears an aesthetic character; because it is an exercise in "formativity": as a result, organism, and model; 2) if spiritual life is art and if art is formativity, the infinitude of transcendence does not shine from the beauty of a façade, a painting, or a statue, but from the beauty of a face, a human face whose opposition with mine, established by language, does not impose a form on me, but elicits freedom of my goodness, gift, and hospitality; 3) if spiritual life is an exercise in formativity and if communication is the lieu where form is transcended into visage and offers a glimpse of infinitude, such transcendent infinitude and infinite transcendence can manifest themselves only as transparency, as light that shines through the veil of language and communication, as revelation; 4) it is on the basis of this aesthetic-theological discourse that one can reject not only the an-aesthetics but also the

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I would like to dedicate this paper to Alex Garcia Rivera (1951–2010), who devoted his entire life to the pursuit of beauty, justice, and truth.

an-aesthesia of evil, fight against one's own acquiescence to it, and see the suffering face of the Other as the truthful revelation of the absolute, as the most precious occasion of communion with transcendence, and as a call for truth, goodness, and beauty.

1 Introduction: The Veil of Maya as an Archetype in the Metaphysical Iconography of the Absolute

Throughout human history, philosophers, artists, and spiritual people of all sorts have striven to conceive the absolute, meant as dimension immune from the limited nature of the human existential experience (Eco, 2008). However, since the conception of the absolute did not consist in its manifestation in the human dimension, but in the human imagination of it, philosophers, artists, and spiritual people of all sorts had to coat their conceptions of the absolute with images that were not themselves absolute, but a product of the limited nature of the human existential experience itself. From the point of view of cultural semiotics, these attempts to conceive and imagine the absolute constitute a corpus of textual patterns, narrative devices, and socio-cultural phenomena that semiotics can observe, describe, analyse, and categorise into types (Leone, 2010).

The present paper claims that human conception and imagination of the absolute has brought about a metaphysical iconography that, with few exceptions, mostly falls into one, broad category, which can be tentatively called "the category of the veil of maya". "Maya", which in Sanskrit literally means "not that", is one of the fundamental ideas in the metaphysics of Indian religions (Dasgupta, 1955: 1; De, 1982; Hager, 1983; Braue, 1984; Tuck, 1986; Gengnagel, 1996). The semantics of this word is extremely vague, since it has been shaped by myriads of spiritual texts and commentaries. However, at the core of such a semantic cloud lies the concept that the duality that the human conscience detects in every manifestation of reality is just apparent – "it is not that", one could say –, since all these manifestations are a dualistic veil of appearance hiding the truthful unity of the whole. Spiritual reflection therefore aims at encouraging humans to pierce such a veil and its discontent in order to merge with the absolute beyond it. In other words, according to the predominant conceptual iconography of the absolute, the absolute is one, since the

presence of another being would inevitably entail a limitation of the absolute, and therefore its submission to the idea of otherness.

Such a metaphysical trend is not only a characteristic of "Eastern spirituality" but it also affects the spirituality of the "West". Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy of the absolute and his adoption of the Indian metaphor of the "veil of maya" represent the clearest intersection in the convergence between the "East" and the "West" (Berger, 2004). To give another example – one that might be closer to the sensibility of contemporary semioticians – although the epistemology of structuralism does not concern metaphysical *noumena*, since that which semioticians and other structuralist thinkers are about is mostly the elaboration of a rational meta-discourse on phenomena, the *imaginaire* of semiotics is not immune from the above-mentioned iconography of the absolute. Greimas, for instance — not only in the "mystical" essay on imperfection (Greimas, 1987), but also in the conception of the semiotics of passion (Greimas and Fontanille, 1991), and even in that of structural semantics (Greimas, 1966) — conceives semantic phenomena as waves that, through complex dynamics that semioticians must investigate, ripple the surface of an ocean of meaning mostly imagined as whole, undetermined, and absolute.

In the present paper, I would like to underline that such metaphysical iconography of the absolute is not without ethical consequences. Expelling dualism and otherness from the metaphysical core of the human conception and imagination of the absolute brings about a certain disaffection for others' pain. Relying on a different philosophical and spiritual trend, this paper will therefore try to explore an alternative metaphysical iconography of the absolute, one in which, paradoxically, the absolute is not imagined as one, or as an oxymoron where the duality of appearance is compressed into unity, or as unattainable nirvana lying beyond a veil of appearance. On the contrary, the paper will investigate a metaphysical tradition that, imagining the absolute according to a different semiotics, places at the core of the human experience of the absolute not unity but duality, not the ecstatic bliss of nirvana but the empathic awareness of pain, not metaphysical solipsism but sacrifice.

Such alternative metaphysical iconography of the absolute will be evoked in response to the following four questions: 1) Is spiritual life art? 2) Is art communication with transcendence? 3) Is communication with transcendence revelation of the absolute? 4) Is revelation of the absolute

communion with pain? The present paper will try to give answers to these four questions through dialogue with three philosophers and theologians: Luigi Pareyson[2], Emmanuel Levinas[3], and Hans Urs von Balthasar[4].

2 Luigi Pareyson: Spiritual Life and Formativity

Luigi Pareyson's works have not been translated into English; Anglophone scholars are rarely familiar with them. Yet, he is one of the most important Italian continental philosophers of the twentieth century. As professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Turin for most of his life, he devoted his efforts to a reformulation of aesthetics, a reinterpretation of existentialism, and a re-foundation of religious hermeneutics (Tomatis, 1998, 2003). His intellectual legacy is enshrined in several groundbreaking books and also lives through the many Italian intellectuals he mentored: some of them, such as Umberto Eco and Gianni Vattimo, have reached international acclaim (Gubatz, 2007, 2009).

In 1953, at a congress on "Aesthetics and Christianity", Luigi Pareyson, a Catholic thinker, presented a paper on "Art and Life" (Pareyson, 1953). According to this paper, a double relation emerges between art, meant as a specific and determined operation, and life, meant as the complex of all human activities: on the one hand, the whole life prepares art, so that an aesthetic character inheres in all its manifestations. Moreover, it is exactly in the act through which art is specified as a distinct operation that the whole life penetrates into it, so that art can become a reason of life for the human being who exerts or contemplates it. Spiritual life prepares art: according to Pareyson's paper, this affirmation can only be understood if the distinction between "aesthetic sphere" and "artistic sphere" is kept in mind. The whole spiritual life is aesthetic in all its manifestations, while "artistic" is an attribute that pertains only to art in the proper sense.

As a consequence, other forms of beauty lie beyond the artistic one, although they are not a result of artistic activity *stricto sensu*. In these cases, Pareyson's paper continues, people define as "beautiful" what is "well done", what is done according to the way required by the particular

[2] Piasco (Cuneo, Italy), 1918 – Rapallo, 1991.

[3] Kaunas (Lithuania), 1906 – Paris, 1995.

[4] Lucerne, 1905 – Basel, 1988.

operation that is done. More precisely, beautiful is what brings about in a determined case the concept itself of the operation that is being done; that which is done in the only way in which, in the very determined circumstance, the thing had to be done, that is, the way that one would gladly imagine as typical, exemplary, and paradigmatic. Pareyson's paper proposes several examples: a beautiful argument is a well constructed one, able to conclude in the way that reason requires in a given case; a beautiful solution succeeds in enunciating what reason itself demanded in order to resolve a determined problem; a beautiful demonstration enfolds according to reason and follows the logical order without deviations, able to reconcile simplicity and completeness in wise equilibrium, and bearing some particular qualities of elegance, the elegance that mathematicians are particularly worried about and jealous of.

The beauty of one's carriage, the beauty of one's conversation, the beauty of moral life, the beauty of fabricated objects: Pareyson's paper claims that in all these cases beauty appears as the result of a well done operation. People define as beautiful what is well done because doing actually is shaping, that is, doing which does not limit itself to execute something that is already established or to apply a technique that is already predisposed but a way of doing that, in the act of doing itself, also invents a way of doing, not only productive but also inventive doing, not only executing but also figuring doing. According to Pareyson's paper, the result of doing meant as shaping is form, so that beauty is nothing but form, form as form. Not in the sense that beauty is one of the attributes of form, but in the sense that form in itself is beautiful and its beauty exactly consists in its being form.

In the second part of his paper, Pareyson dwells on the characters of form: form is result, organism, and model. First, form is result because it is the result of an attempt, and an attempt is never sure of its good outcome but is always exposed to the danger of failure. Result to be such must appear as a happy resolution of attempts always exposed to failure. Second, form is organism because, as result, it lives its own life, without depending on anything external to it. Form has its own purpose and its own perfection in itself. Form is therefore "unitotality", indissoluble and governed by an inner "organic law", not sum of parts but an indivisible whole. Finally, form is model because the inventive energy through which form succeeds in overcoming the threat of failure intrinsic to the attempts

that produce it still acts after its results, attracting prosecutions, imitations, and developments. Such is the answer to the first question: spiritual life is, in a certain sense, art because it bears an aesthetic character, because it is exercise of "formativity": as result, organism, and model.[5]

3 Emmanuel Levinas: Formativity and Visage

Emmanuel Levinas does not need any introduction. He is one of the most prominent philosophers of the twentieth century. All his works have been translated into English and are well known to scholars all over the world. In *Totalité et infini, Essai sur l'exteriorité* (1961), Levinas suggests that things are hidden under form. He develops this thought through a comparison between the concept of façade and that of face. It is art, he writes, that lends to things a sort of façade, that through which objects are not only seen but exhibit themselves. The obscurity of matter would therefore be the state of being that does not have any façade. From this point of view, the concept of façade, borrowed from buildings, might suggest that architecture is the foremost of fine arts. Yet, Levinas continues, in architecture beauty is constituted as that whose essence is indifference, cold splendour, and silence. Through a façade, the thing that keeps its secret exposes itself imprisoned in its monumental essence and myth, where it shines as splendour, but does not deliver itself. Then, according to Levinas's argument, if transcendence is opening par excellence, and if vision of transcendence is vision of the opening itself of being, transcendence cannot be viewed as façade, but as visage.

For Levinas, visage is both a phenomenological and an ethical concept. In visual or tactile sensation, one's identity envelops the otherness of the object, which therefore becomes content, hidden behind form. A visage, instead, is present in its refusal to be contained. The Other remains infinitely transcendent, but language presents this transcendence as epiphany of visage. For Levinas, language therefore is the power itself that breaks the continuity of being and history. The formal structure of language, its capacity to constitute the Other as visage, as interlocutor, announces the ethic inviolability of the Other, its "sanctity". This is what Levinas names

[5] Cf. also Pareyson, 1947, 1954. The secondary literature on the aesthetics of Pareyson is quite extensive; cf. Finamore, 1999, and Caneva, 2008.

"welcome of the visage": the idea of transcendence, of infinitude is produced in opposition to discourse, in sociality. The relation with visage, with the absolutely Other that one cannot contain, with the infinite Other, is, nevertheless, one's idea, it is commerce. Yet, such a relation is maintained without violence, in peace with the absolute Otherness.

The first revelation of the Other, Levinas concludes, does not consist in seizing its negative resistance, in circumventing it by ruse. *Je ne lutte pas avec un dieu sans visage, mais réponds à son expression, à sa révélation*. I do not fight against a faceless god, but respond to its expression, to its revelation. If, as Pareyson would say, beauty is form, according to Levinas manifesting oneself as visage is imposing oneself beyond a manifested and purely phenomenical form, it is presenting oneself in a way that is not reducible to manifestation, without intermediation of any image, in one's nudity, in one's hunger. And if beauty is splendour that shines unknown to the shining being, what is provoked by the imposition of being as visage is not beauty but goodness, not re-presentation but responsibility. This is the answer to the second question: if spiritual life is art, and if art is formativity, the infinitude of transcendence does not shine from the beauty of a façade, a painting, or a statue, but from the beauty of a face, a human face whose opposition to mine, established by language, does not impose a form on me, but elicits the freedom of my goodness, my gift, and my hospitality.[6]

4 Hans Urs von Balthasar: Visage and Revelation

Hans Urs von Balthasar does not need any introduction either. In "Wahrheit der Welt", first volume of "Theologik", he proposes a conception of truth, beauty, and goodness that seems to resonate, in many regards, with Levinas' conception of visage (von Balthasar, 1985). The religious backgrounds of the two philosophers are different, Jewish in case of Levinas, Catholic in that of Balthasar. Yet, they are inspired by similar philosophical trends and reach comparable conclusions.

Truth is recurrently defined by Balthasar as disclosure of being. Just as in Levinas, though, so also in "Wahrheit der Welt" such an opening is not an "opening in itself", unrelated, but an "opening for", an accessibility,

[6] Literature on Levinas is extensive. As a useful point of departure, cf. Burggraeve, 1990.

with the implicit importance of an offer that is made. Balthasar tries to demonstrate that the subject, to whom this opening refers, is immediately an interlocutor, so that truth is both immanent in the opened object and includes a transcendent relation of knowledgeableness for the Other.

Furthermore, in Balthasar, truth is intertwined with goodness: if truth is disclosure for, then truth intrinsically is communication, wherein Balthasar distinguishes between the communicating, which corresponds to the ground of being, the communicated, which corresponds to the being as appearing, and communication itself, which corresponds to the movement from the ground to the phenomenon. According to Balthasar, it is only through communication that what exists realises its worth and succeeds in knowing its own face not as something alien, as something attributed to it from the outside, as façade, as Levinas would say, but as its own essential identity. Through the same movement of communication, Balthasar continues, being relinquishes the avarice of being-only-for-itself in order to disclose itself and communicate, so receiving through this original renunciation its weight as goodness, its unrepeatable worth. Given this coincidence between truth and goodness, beauty for Balthasar is nothing but the immediate emergence of every being paradoxically grounded in its groundless ground. It is transparency, through every phenomenon, of the arcane ground of being.

According to Balthasar, such intertwining and fundamental superposition of truth, goodness, and beauty therefore demonstrates that everything is comprehensible and revealed only insofar as it is grounded in an ultimate mystery, whose character of mysteriousness does not consist in lack of clearness but, on the contrary, in superabundance of light. But if truth, goodness, and beauty emerge as transparency, as revelation, this implies that things are, always and until the end, essentially veiled. Their being veiled means, according to Balthasar, a delimitation of their unveiling, of their truth. Veiling indeed, Balthasar continues, is not simply opposed to unveiling like an external barrier, but rather like a form or like a property inherent in unveiling itself.

Reformulating this idea through concepts and terms elaborated by Pareyson, Levinas, and Balthasar, one might say that form is veil under which the truth, goodness, and beauty of visage are hidden, yet this veiling is necessary to unveiling, since revelation is not simply removal of the veil from the superabundant, transcendent, and infinite light of the visage, but

also re-veiling, transparency that can be perceived as such only insofar as it is light which transpires through a veil.[7]

In "Ontology of Freedom" (*Ontologia della libertà*), Pareyson meditates on the dialectics between veiling and unveiling in the hermeneutics of religious experience (1995). According to Pareyson, if God is so transcendent that humans cannot keep living after having seen his face, this is so because God has a face, which he offers, shows, and reveals or, on the contrary, withdraws, hides and conceals. Pareyson quotes a series of Biblical passages where transcendence is described as manifesting itself through a paradoxical dialectics between veiling and unveiling. Nevertheless, he rejects the validity of any attempt at de-mythologizing and replacing this imaginative language, which is eloquent insofar as it is mythical and symbolical.

According to Pareyson, indeed, an expression that aims at divesting itself as much as possible of the poetic and anthropomorphic character, so claiming to succeed in seizing divinity and showing its nature, runs the risk of being the least revealing for – and here Pareyson seems to echo Balthasar's intuition – does not succeed in penetrating the dialectics through which God, in his "inexorable and impervious transcendence", hides, and by hiding reveals himself, and does not reveal himself if not by hiding, so that about every manifestation of His, one must say that He veils in the act of un-veiling and vice versa, but one cannot say that He discloses more than He hides, neither that He conceals more than He shows.

This is the answer to the third question: if spiritual life is an exercise in formativity and if communication is the lieu where form is transcended into visage and offers a glimpse of infinitude, such transcendent infinitude, such infinite transcendence can manifest itself only as transparency, as light that shines through the veil of language and communication, as revelation.

5 The Absolute as Suffering Otherness

The photograph showed on the next page was taken in 2005 by Francine Orr in Saint Joseph Hospital, at Kitgum, Uganda. It pictures Lokeria Aciro, a forty-year-old woman. A refugee in a camp for internally displaced people.

[7] Among the countless scholarly contributions on Balthasar, a good starting point is Howsare, 2009.

One day she moved outside its borders in order to look for firewood. Suddenly, she was caught by an incursion of a local guerrilla group, paradoxically called *Lord's Resistance Army*, and attacked by a fighter who cut off her lips and ears with a machete. The most horrifying element of this episode is that the aggressor was eleven years old.

According to reports of international human rights observers and activists, LRA fighters often maim the face of their victims, children frequently being among the most brutal perpetrators of such tortures. Given the systematic character with which these mutilations are inflicted, it is argued that they are part of a repertory of brutalities handed down within the LRA from generation to generation of fighters, through rituals of initiation to violence in which violence itself plays an essential role, brutalities that aim at preserving the LRA's capacity to strike terror into North Uganda inhabitants (Leone, 2008).

There is no time to evoke the tragic geopolitical background of this violence, nor to outline a cultural history, phenomenology, or semiotics of mutilation. It is evident, though, that in this case its purpose is not only the terror of the victim, but also that of the community to which the victim belongs. It is for this reason that the victim is not killed. It is for this reason that the most visible parts of her face are maimed. Cutting off lips and ears turns the face of the victim into a mute message of terror circulating in the community, a message in which the feeling of atrocious physical pain is paralleled by that of an equally devastating psychological suffering, caused by the de-facement of the victim but also by the consequent incapacity of expressing this pain through speech. The face, bereft of any physiognomy, of any form, of any humanity, disruptively evokes the idea of naked life at the disposal of a child whom violence transforms into a monster, the idea of *homo sacer*, as Giorgio Agamben (1995) would say.

Creating the cultural, social, and political conditions thanks to which this violence might cease is beyond the capacities of theological discourse. Victims of Uganda, as well as victims of Sudan, Afghanistan, or Burma, just to mention a few of the many places where human suffering is currently omnipresent, do not primarily need aesthetic theology but a firm commitment of the international community. Yet, it is hard to believe that this commitment will be possible without being inspired, brought about, fostered, and guided by a certain idea of humanity, an idea that, like Pareyson, recognises that spiritual life must pursue beauty, an idea

that, like Levinas, identifies this beauty, and its flavour of transcendent infinitude, in the sacredness shining through the Other's visage, and an idea that, like Balthasar, conceives such communication with transcendence as truthful, good, and beautiful revelation of being.

If this idea of humanity is embraced, then Lokeria Aciro's maimed visage must be interpreted as de-facement of being, as trace of the presence of evil in the world and history, as scripture of a negative force that thwarts any possibility of spiritual life, denies any humanity of the Other's visage, and transforms it from transparency of infinitude into opaqueness of abyss. Yet, Pareyson was right in stressing the need to distinguish evil itself, i. e., guilt and sin, from suffering. According to Pareyson, evil cannot be constructive: even if taken to the extreme, it does not lead, with dialectic necessity, to positivity through reversal. Evil is, in itself, devastating and ruinous: its power is great, but only destructive. The only force superior to the immense force of evil is suffering. The power of evil is great, but the power of pain is greater. Pareyson defines it as the hidden energy of the world, the only one able to confront any destructive tendency and defeat the lethal effects of evil. He speaks about the algebra of suffering: human freedom has brought about evil, and evil has brought about suffering, yet these two negativities have generated a positivity (Pareyson, 1995).

But how is it possible to conceive this positivity, after seeing the de-faced face of Lokeria Aciro? Developing a characteristic trend of Catholic theology, Pareyson suggests that the power of pain does not only consist in expiation and occasion for redemption, but in the fact that suffering, aware of its redemptive value, also becomes revelation: it opens the painful heart of reality and unveils the secret of being. But where does the power of pain come from, and what secret does it reveal? In his answer to these questions, Pareyson stresses that God himself suffers; that suffering is actually characteristic of God; that God wants to suffer and begins to suffer from creation, where he withdraws into himself and voluntarily limits and restricts himself in order to give space to a free humanity. Suffering therefore is the place of utmost solidarity between God and humanity, and only in suffering God and humanity can join their efforts.[8]

[8] On this aspect of Pareyson's philosophy, cf. Di Napoli, 2000; Ghisleri, 2003; Sgreccia, 2006; Stevenazzi, 2006.

Conclusion: Absolute and Empathy

Pareyson's thoughts clearly stem from a specific religious culture and a personal interpretation of its theological tradition. Yet, Pareyson's ideas, as well as those of Levinas and Balthasar, partially transcend any particular faith and develop a poetic theological discourse about the meaning of humanity. It is on the basis of this discourse, where theological meditation on infinitude and transcendence meets aesthetical consideration for finitude and immanence, that the absolute can be en-visaged, that a human visage can be given to the idea of the absolute and that the idea of the absolute can be discovered in a human visage. Even more fundamentally, it is on the basis of this aesthetic-theological discourse that the absolute can be discovered in a face that evil has tried to de-face, to hide under a façade of ugliness, to push into the abyss of non-being and inhumanity. Finally, it is on the basis of this aesthetic-theological discourse that one can reject not only the an-aesthetics but also the anaesthesia of evil, fights against one's own acquiescence to it, and seeing the suffering face of the Other as the truthful revelation of the absolute, as the most precious occasion of communion with transcendence, and as a call for truth, goodness, and beauty.

This, I believe, is the answer to the fourth question: the absolute does not await us behind a veil of maya, but in the visage of another human being in pain.

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